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Focus: Pathways to College

Texas Pride and a Model Worth Celebrating

The Power of Wall-to-Wall Early College High Schools

By Hector Bojorquez & Bobbie Sue Gonzalez, Ed.D.

There are many reasons to be proud of Texas. It is home to tacos, the Texas Hill Country, and rich athletic traditions. We are known for celebrating what makes Texas great. But one achievement we are not nearly vocal enough about is the unparalleled success of the innovative wall-to-wall early college high schools model right here at home.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) ISD, a district in the Texas Rio Grande Valley. In May 2023, 16% of PSJA ISD seniors graduated with an associate degree compared to a statewide rate of 2% (TEA, 2025). Hundreds more students received college credit while in high school, and 54% of students earned industry-based certifications in high-wage, high-demand fields. These outcomes are the result of a deliberate strategy launched in 2007 under the leadership of then Superintendent Daniel King, Ph.D., and carried forward today by Superintendent Alejandro Elias, Ed.D.

The outcomes have occurred in a region once known for disinvestment and low expectations. Two decades ago, many referred to this area as a place defined by educational abandonment.

Today, PSJA ISD offers one of the strongest examples in the country of what public education can accomplish when investment, access and opportunity are placed at the center of the system.

The term *wall-to-wall early college high school* describes a model that PSJA ISD has implemented consistently and refined over time, with unique characteristics. While elements like strong college partnerships and a college-going culture are critical, the foundation of this model rests on five interlocking principles.

First, the model guarantees universal participation. Every student is placed directly into the early college program. There is no separate cohort, no opt-in, and no sorting by academic ability. Regardless of their prior performance, all students follow a college-credit-bearing pathway that often leads to an associate degree.

Second, access is truly open. Students do not need to meet GPA thresholds, take placement exams or show academic readiness to participate. This design eliminates traditional barriers and ensures full participation from historically underserved groups, such as first-generation college students, English learners and those from low-income households.

Third, college and career readiness are fully integrated. Students pursuing career and technical education are immersed in the same college-going culture as their peers. Their programs require both industry certifications and college coursework. This approach has positioned PSJA ISD as an innovator in strategies like Pathways in Technology Early College

(cont. on Page 2)

The "wall-to-wall" design eliminates traditional barriers to college preparation and ensures full participation from historically underserved groups, such as first-generation college students, English learners and those from low-income households.

(Texas Pride and a Model Worth Celebrating, continued from Page 1)

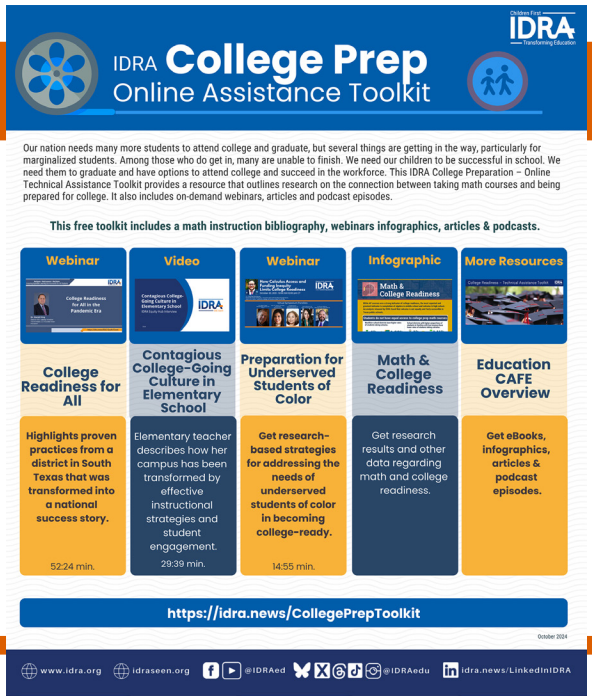
High Schools (P-TECH), while maintaining an inclusive and rigorous academic structure.

Fourth, the school system provides strong support. High expectations are matched with high levels of assistance. Every student receives access to academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, summer bridge programs and targeted interventions. These supports are embedded in the schools' operations rather than offered only to those who are already excelling.

Fifth, the model is implemented across the entire district. PSJA ISD does not treat early college as a boutique program or pilot campus. Each high school is fully committed to the early college mission. These are not programs housed within traditional schools. They are whole institutions dedicated to the model. All students at all campuses benefit from the same expectation: to graduate with meaningful college credit or a degree.

Free toolkit on supporting student preparation for college. Includes videos, research, podcast episodes and more!

https://idra.news/CollegePrepToolkit



A National Outlier – Truly Texan!

Early college high schools have been implemented in many regions across the United States. The model supports students by exposing them to college environments during high school. One study funded by the U.S. Department of Education shows that students who attend early college high schools are significantly more likely to enroll in college and complete associate and/or bachelor's degrees within six years of their expected high school graduation than their peers in traditional high schools. The impacts also are consistent across demographic groups, demonstrating strong effectiveness for students regardless of background. (Song et al., 2021)

Despite that growth, PSJA ISD's model remains highly unusual in its structure, scale and philosophy. Most early college programs do not reflect the open-access, whole-campus and districtwide commitment seen in PSJA ISD.

A large share of wall-to-wall early college campuses nationally are operated by charter school networks. The campuses often serve targeted populations and are governed outside of the traditional public school system. While some promote the idea of open access, many require eligibility criteria, such as minimum GPAs, test scores and behavioral screenings. Others rely on application-based lotteries that, even when academically neutral, filter access based on awareness, family engagement or logistical navigation.

Among traditional public schools, very few fully meet the PSJA ISD principles. Most either limit early college participation to a select group of students or operate within traditional schools as partial programs.

Our recent review of national models indicates that fewer than 10 non-charter early college high schools allow open enrollment without a lottery or academic criteria. Even fewer operate as part of a districtwide system. Some function as stand-alone schools housed on college campuses without being integrated into a comprehensive public education framework.

PSJA ISD stands apart because it combines open enrollment with total inclusion. All students are given the same opportunity and are expected to rise to the challenge with the support they need.

The district's results demonstrate what is possible and proof of what can be achieved systemi-

(cont. on Page 8)

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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Texas Public Schools See Historic Improvement in Student Retention

Highlights from IDRA's 39th Annual Texas Public School Attrition Study

By Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, Ph.D., & Joanna Sánchez, Ph.D.

IDRA's most recent annual attrition study reveals that 18% of the freshman class of 2020-21 in Texas left school prior to graduating in 2023-24. The statewide attrition rate dropped by four percentage points from the previous year, indicating positive trends in high school retention.

Our new analysis reports the lowest attrition rates recorded for Texas public schools since IDRA's hallmark study in 1986. This is particularly notable as the class of 2024 was the first cohort to return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures. These students faced unique challenges as they navigated their high school experience and re-engaged academically and socially after disruptions.

The attrition rate for Latino students reached the lowest recorded at 22%, down from 26% the previous year. The rate for Black students also declined four points reaching 27%, a level matched only twice.

This year marks IDRA's 39th attrition study in a series of annual reports on trends in student dropout and attrition from Texas public high schools. IDRA's latest report presents state and county attrition rates for 2023-24 based on fall student enrollment data reported by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

In 1986, IDRA released its first comprehensive study of school dropouts in Texas for the Class of 1986, pioneering a now industry-wide standard for measuring statewide high school attrition. Prior to that, the state did not report dropout data, leaving many students who had already left or were being lost from public schools largely unaccounted for.

This problem prompted IDRA to develop its original attrition methodology to calculate the number and percentage of high school students who leave school before graduating with a high school diploma. IDRA's hallmark study led to the state law requiring TEA to collect and report dropout data each year.

IDRA has since continued to measure high school attrition each year by applying the same theoretical and mathematical framework. Attrition rates are an indicator of schools' holding power, or the ability to retain students in school until they graduate.

Attrition is the decrease in cohort size from freshman to senior years. Therefore, attrition is the percentage change in grade level enrollment between a base year (freshman year) and an end year (senior year) for a class. In other words, attrition measures how many students who enter high school freshman year are still in school four years later. IDRA's methodology has allowed for ongoing comparative cohort analyses over time.

IDRA Study Highlights

The 2023-24 statewide attrition rate of 18% is 15 percentage points lower than the initial rate of 33% found in 1985-86, and the lowest attrition rate recorded. Attrition trends among public high school students show encouraging

(cont. on Page 4)

Even with this great improvement, schools are still twice as likely to lose Latino students and Black students as white students before they graduate.

Statewide High School Attrition Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Group	1985-86 Rate	2021-22 Rate	2022-23 Rate	2023-24 Rate	Change Since 1985-86 Study	Change Since Last Year
All students	33%	20%	22%	18%	↓	↓
Asian/Pacific Islander	33%	7%	n/a	8%	↓	n/a
Black	34%	25%	27%	23%	↓	↓
Latino	45%	24%	26%	22%	↓	↓
Native American	45%	20%	n/a	25%	↓	n/a
White	27%	12%	12%	11%	↓	↓

IDRA, 2025

(Texas Public Schools See Historic Improvement in Student Retention, continued from Page 3)

improvements since the COVID-19 pandemic, which negatively affected student retention nationwide.

Attrition rates across racial-ethnic student groups this year also show improvement. However rate gaps between Black and Latino students and their white peers continue.

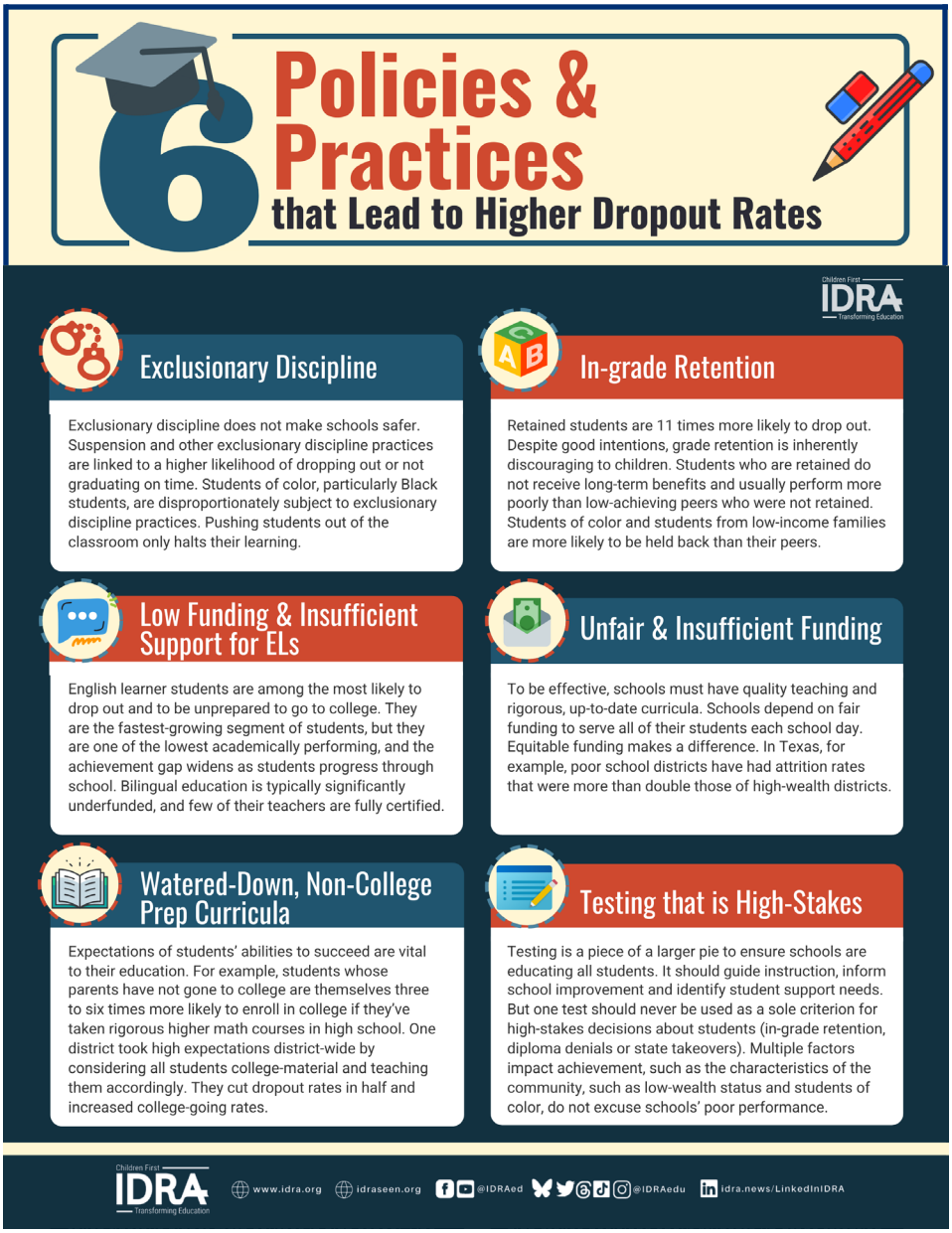
Key findings from IDRA's latest attrition study include the following:

- After several years of worsening attrition rates, Texas public schools reached their lowest attrition rate reported by IDRA's attrition study.
- In four decades, the overall attrition rate declined from 33% in 1985-86 to 18% in 2023-24.
- Schools lost almost one out of every five high school students from the Class of 2024, translating to more than seven students per hour.
- Total statewide attrition and rates for all major racial-ethnic groups (Black, Latino, white) improved since the academic year during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21). For the Class of 2024, Latino students and Black students were approximately two times more likely to leave school without graduating than their white peers.
- The attrition rate gap between white students and Black students has increased by 71% between 1985-86 and 2022-23; For Latino students, this gap has narrowed by 19%.

IDRA recently published the 2023-24 study online (https://idra.news/AttritionStudy). It includes detailed methodology, historical statewide and county-level attrition rates, and figures for total students lost to attrition disaggregated by race-ethnicity.

It also includes an analysis of TEA's most recent dropout report and Texas' ranking nationally as reported by NCES.

Studies show that the strongest school-related predictor of dropping out is poor academic performance. Students perform better in school if they feel welcome, safe and secure. IDRA identified six policies and practices that lead to higher dropout rates (see graphic). Communities can work together to examine these six policies and practices and to take action for the benefit of students and the future of Texas.



Resources

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Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, Ph.D., is an IDRA research analyst (christina.munoz@idra.org). Joanna Sánchez, Ph.D., is IDRA's senior policy researcher (joanna.sanchez@idra.org).

College Diversity Policy Changes Compound Longstanding Barriers to College and Present New Ones

By Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D.

Beginning two years ago, Texas students experienced major changes to college diversity policies. Texas Senate Bill 17 and U.S. Supreme Court rulings striking race-conscious admissions practices in college were issued in June 2023. Both changes altered how Texas colleges offer outreach, services and programs to high school students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Texas colleges have implemented these policy changes across their institutional academic and student programs, at times raising questions about overcompliance and with pushback from students and faculty (Kamola, 2024).

In 2024, with support from Greater Texas Foundation, IDRA initiated a study on how Texas high school students with college aspirations are affected by policy changes.

The study focuses on the experiences of students who may be the first in their family to consider college, who are from households earning lower incomes, and students whose racial, ethnic or gender identities would be considered historically marginalized from college access opportunities.

IDRA published a preliminary report, *A Community-Based Study on the Impact of Texas' SB 17 on Marginalized College-Going Students*, this spring (https://idra.news/CollegeAccessReport0425). It highlights initial findings from 11 roundtable sessions we held in the fall of 2024.

In 2025, IDRA conducted 10 additional focus groups in which participants shared ideas and insights on necessary resources, information and next steps for high school students navigating their journey to college as well as for the parents and educators helping them.

Participants relayed that the policy changes have impacted whether they see colleges as welcoming or supportive places for historically marginalized students.

High school students shared that they need more peer-to-peer information about college applications and transitions, and they want to access more leadership opportunities. Current college students emphasized that they need targeted academic support, career advising and easy access to mental health services.

Parents shared that they are more concerned about their children experiencing bullying or harassment based on their racial identities in college, and that they want more ways to engage in their children's college process.

Teachers and college advisors who support students throughout their college journeys to graduation reported that many students feel discouraged from pursuing degrees and need support to encourage student leadership, college transitions and life skills.

One high school college counselor we interviewed said: "I have spent a lot of time in the last year convincing kids that colleges still want them. About 80% of my campus are Black or Brown kids, and a large percentage of them belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and so they feel very concerned about whether their presence is even welcomed at some different universities."

Public school educators voiced the need for stronger connections with each other and colleges to better navigate the new changes to students' college opportunities.

All of these reflections indicate that the policy changes affect how Texas high school students see college as a place where they belong and can succeed. These changes compound longstanding barriers to historically marginalized students' access to college. This affects how families and educators advise students and the college choices that students from marginalized backgrounds are making.

(cont. on Page 6)

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– High school college counselor interviewed for IDRA's study

IDRA Releases Model Policy to Strengthen College Counseling

New Model Policy on Culturally-Sustaining School Counseling Aims to Reduce Gaps in College Access

By Terrence Wilson, J.D.

College degrees open new doors for students in their lives and in their careers. School counselors play a pivotal role in helping students navigate the structural and cultural systems and barriers that shape college and career access. This role is especially critical for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, who often lack access to the support and networks that make higher education attainable.

But often, counselors are overwhelmed, short-staffed and pulled into duties that take them away from students. Counselors across the country are stretched thin by limited resources, insufficient training and systemic inequities that make it harder to provide equitable, high-quality college and career guidance.

For example, a recent IDRA study reveals that students, parents and educators are already seeing the effects of restrictive laws and the end of race-conscious admissions. These include barriers in finding helpful college information, funding opportunities, key student services, and staff personnel to help them access and succeed in college (Latham Sikes, 2025).

School counselors need time, tools and resources to focus on what matters most: helping students access and succeed in college.

Effective, culturally-sustaining school counseling cannot depend solely on individual educators. Particularly in the face of laws and school board actions that harm students, state leaders must take proactive steps to ensure every counselor is equipped, trained and empowered to advocate for equity and expand access to post-secondary opportunities.

Designed to Face Challenges that Hinder College Counseling for High School Students

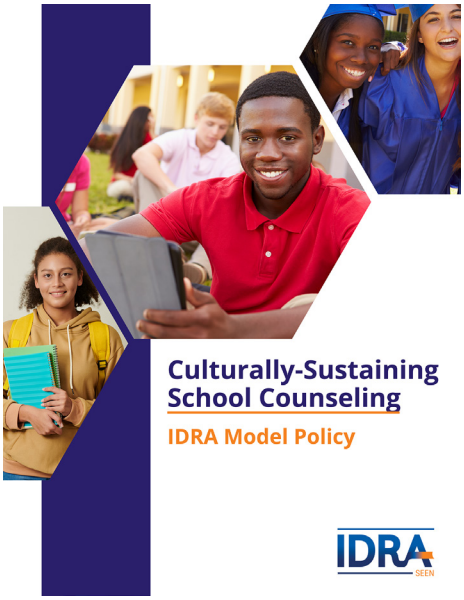
IDRA released our newest model policy package on culturally-sustaining school counseling to help schools and state leaders equip school counselors to enhance college and career guidance schoolwide.

The package provides adaptable policy language for states, school districts and schools to adopt research-based strategies for improving school counseling programs and reducing gaps in college access and enrollment.

The package also provides guiding principles and a robust set of resources for implementation and advocacy to support culturally-sustaining school counseling practices so that every student, regardless of race, income or background, has a fair chance to achieve their college and career goals.

The package is available free on the IDRA SEEN Model Policy Shop website (https://idraseen.org/model-policy-shop).

For more information, contact Terrence Wilson, J.D., at terrence.wilson@idra.org. More resources and tools are on IDRA's SEEN website at https://idraseen.org.



Resources

Latham Sikes, C. (March 2025). *A Community-Based Study on the Impact of Texas' SB 17 on Marginalized College-Going Students: Preliminary Findings – Roundtable Report.* IDRA.

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(College Diversity Policy Changes, continued from Page 5)

The current final phase of IDRA's study compiles feedback from students, parents, and educators across high school and higher education on community-based resources we designed to support students' college access. These community-driven resources provide tools for parent support and engagement, student leadership in high school, and tips on developing peer-to-peer support systems as high school students explore and transition to college.

Resources

Kamola, I. (2024). *Manufacturing Backlash: Right-Wing Think Tanks and Legislative Attacks on Higher Education, 2021-2023.* AAUP.

Latham Sikes, C. (March 2025). *A Community-Based Study on the Impact of Texas' SB 17 on Marginalized College-Going Students: Preliminary Findings – Roundtable Report.* IDRA.

Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., is IDRA's deputy director of policy (chloe.sikes@idra.org).

Texas Dreamers Won't Be Silenced

Texas Dreamers Won't Be Silenced – IDRA and TxILC File Amicus Brief on Behalf of Business, Faith, Educator and Student Groups Urging the Fifth Circuit to Protect the Texas Dream Act

IDRA, alongside the Texas Immigration Law Council and a broad coalition of business, faith, educator and student groups, filed an amicus brief with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in *U.S. v. Texas* to do what Texas state leaders refused to do: defend the *Texas Dream Act* and the ability of Texas high school graduates to access and succeed in college, regardless of immigration status.

In 2001, Governor Rick Perry signed the *Texas Dream Act*, allowing certain undocumented Texans who graduated from Texas high schools and met other requirements to become eligible for in-state college tuition rates.

"For nearly a quarter century, the *Texas Dream Act* has provided a pathway to college for countless Texas Dreamers, who are now the nurses, teachers and entrepreneurs that make our workforce stronger and communities more vibrant," said IDRA President and CEO Celina Moreno, J.D.

"That's why the Texas legislature has listened to Texas business, faith, education and student leaders and repeatedly rejected fringe attempts to repeal one of our state's most successful education laws," she said.

On June 4, a federal judge ruled the *Texas Dream Act* unconstitutional, halting eligibility for in-state tuition rates for undocumented students, just as many began their summer semesters. The decision came only hours after the U.S. Department of Justice sued Texas to end the law.

Rather than defend Texas's longstanding, bipartisan law, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton instead joined the DOJ in asking the court to invalidate the *Texas Dream Act*. The court order stemmed from a collusive attempt by DOJ and the Texas Attorney General to bypass the state's legislative authority and democratic process, setting a troubling precedent for how laws are made and undone in this country.

"This deeply popular state law ended abruptly without a hearing, public input or an opportunity for Texas Dreamers to have their day in court," said IDRA Chief Legal Analyst Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D.

"IDRA is proud to file this amicus brief in support of the Intervenors and give voice to a broad coalition of stakeholders who rely on the *Texas Dream Act* and have had their livelihoods derailed by this government collusion" she said.

The consequences of the litigation are real and urgent. Texas Dreamers have already seen their tuition bills skyrocket because out-of-state tuition rates are exponentially higher than in-state tuition rates.

Many students with lawful presence have been unjustly denied eligibility for in-state tuition rates, such as those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Others have been forced to delay their college plans, take out private loans to cover unexpected tuition increases, or drop out of school altogether.

As Julieta Garibay, a *Texas Dream Act* beneficiary, co-founder of United We Dream, the nation's largest immigrant youth-led network and IDRA consultant, recently reminded us: "Texas made a wise investment over two decades ago when it passed [the *Texas Dream Act*]. That investment has paid off in the form of stronger communities, a better-educated workforce, and a richer civic life. Dismantling that progress would not only harm immigrants – it would harm Texas."

IDRA filed the amicus brief on behalf of the following organizations and individuals:

- Texans for Economic Growth
- Faith Works
- Texas Impact
- John Stautner, CEO of ETSZONE and founder of TexasGOPVote
- Stan Marek, CEO of Marek Companies
- Rational Middle
- Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce (TAMACC)
- FWD.us
- Texas Immigration Law Council
- IDRA
- Barbara Hines, Attorney at Law
- ImmSchools
- EdTrust
- Texas State Teachers Association
- Texas AFT
- Latino Texas Policy Center
- Asian Texans for Justice
- Children at Risk
- Texas Association for Bilingual Education (TABE)
- Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education (TACHE)
- Texas Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (TADOHE)
- MASBA-School Board Members for Latino Equity
- Ethnic Studies Network of Texas
- Eta Alpha Chapter of Sigma Lambda Beta International Fraternity
- Xi Chapter of Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority
- Students Engaged in Advancing Texas (SEAT)
- Every Texan
- United We Dream
- Children's Defense Fund (CDF-Texas)

See the brief at https://idra.news/DreamActAmicus2025.

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Focus: Pathways to College

(Texas Pride and a Model Worth Celebrating, continued from Page 2)

cally. In a time when educational opportunities are a central concern across the country, this wall-to-wall early college high school district offers a vision of public education in which no student is excluded from opportunity, and every student is prepared for success beyond high school.

Kickstart College-Ready – A Regional Partnership for Expansion

Recognizing the transformative power of the wall-to-wall early college model, IDRA and Region One Education Service Center (ESC), directed by Dr. King, have joined forces to expand the inclusive practices across the Rio Grande Valley and beyond.

With the support from Greater Texas Foundation, we designed Kickstart College-Ready to provide deeply embedded, sustained technical assistance to three other school districts.

Through coordinated coaching, mentoring and on-the-ground support, IDRA and ESC Region One will help school districts implement similar foundational elements that define these successes. This collaboration supports campuses seeking state early college designation for the first time, as well as assisting districts that already have early college programs to deepen their impact, expand their reach and strengthen sustainability.

What makes this effort unique is its alignment of vision, capacity and community voice. ESC Region One brings regional leadership and deep alignment with state priorities. At the same time, IDRA contributes decades of experience in systemic school transformation, asset-based engagement with families and evidence-based frameworks for scaling focused innovation.

Together, we will support district and campus leaders in Los Fresnos CISD, San Benito CISD, and La Feria ISD in co-designing early college structures that are grounded in local contexts and driven by high expectations for all students.

It is easy to see why this model deserves to be a point of pride for Texas. For nearly two decades, PSJA ISD has consistently delivered strong results, enabling thousands of students, not just the academically advanced, to graduate with associate degrees while still in high school. Its success lies in both its longevity and its effectiveness with student populations in school districts across the state.

This record of achievement leads families, educators and communities to ask a clear and urgent question: Why not in our schools?

Resources

Bojorquez, H. (2019). *College Bound and Determined.* IDRA.

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